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ABSTRACT

Every educational theory has behind it a particular image of human beings and their development that supports a particular view of the learning process. This paper examines the image of children underlying Waldorf education. The paper identifies the individual and unique Self as the "third factor," that together with heredity and environment, contribute to individual development. The goal of the Waldorf curriculum and teaching methods is to unlock the true potential living in each child, the true Self, which gradually awakens to its natural and human-cultural environment and its true Self and abilities. Three seven-year phases occur through childhood and youth, each manifesting an age-specific approach to learning. From birth to age 7, learning takes place through doing, and the Waldorf educational focus is on bodily intelligence, play, oral language, and practical activities. From 7 to 14 years, the Waldorf emphasis is on a soul- and heart-oriented perception and understanding of the natural and human environment. Learning is focused on reading and storytelling, rhythmic activities, practical activities to address feelings of insecurity resulting from subject-object consciousness and inner feelings of separation, and the physical sciences, stemming from growing abilities in abstract cause-and-effect thinking. During the high school years, Waldorf education focuses on fostering moral responsibility, social consciousness, and independent thinking through integrating arts and crafts, story/history/geography, and sciences. (KB)

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CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CURRICULUM IN WALDORF EDUCATION

Astrid Schmitt-Stegmann

Every educational theory has behind it a certain image of the human being, even if this is not explicitly stated. In our present time this image is very much connected to our mechanistic world conception, i.e. human abilities are often compared to those of computers and in this comparison, human beings fall short. Is the human being a less capable computer, merely an information processing machine? Are we fulfilling our human task by acting primarily as consumers? The concept that we carry of the human being and his/her development determines how we approach the child, the atmosphere in the classroom, and our attitude towards the whole learning process. It will effect how we speak, how we formulate our questions and present our material.

The image of the human being that lives in Waldorf education is that in every child we can witness the unfolding of a miracle. This miracle is the manifestation and growth of an individuality intrinsically and singularly different from any other human being. The miracle is the genuine essence hidden within. The appreciation, yes even the reverence for this unique essence, the Self, is the focal point of Waldorf education. Acknowledging this individual and unique Self is what we can call the "third

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factor" in Waldorf school founder Rudolf Steiner's developmental insight. Heredity and environment are not the only factors in human development. The Self that responds to these two factors is the most essential element. If it is strengthened in a healthy, balanced way, this Self can be the determining factor in life. In Rudolf Steiner's education the curriculum and the creative methodology aim to address the developing child in such a way as to "unlock" the true potential living in each child, the true Self.

Author and educator Barry Sanders speaks about this Self, "the concept of the self that shapes our lives from behind the scenes--no one questions its presence--no one doubts its importance. Most people would agree that it is almost impossible to imagine life without a self." (1) He speaks about the dismal social conditions in our time and the hopelessness and despair, including the problems of drop-outs, teen suicides, drugs, alcohol, gangs, and violence--we read about these daily. Sanders suggests: "The solution begins in recapturing the self." (2)

This Self is the one that learns, strives, thinks, is motivated, creative, inventive, confident and active to name just a few of its attributes. The Self gradually awakens to its natural and human-cultural environment on the one hand, and to its own Self and abilities on the other.

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Rudolf Steiner developed a curriculum that would nourish and support the developmental steps of the growing child in this process of awakening.

Rudolf Steiner sees the path from childhood to youth, from kindergarten to high school, as unfolding in three approximately seven year steps or phases, each manifesting an age specific approach to learning. (Rudolf Steiner also points to further cycles within these seven years phases. To mention all of those would lead us beyond the scope of this article.) This age specific approach to learning can be experienced in all children though, of course, individualized.

THE YOUNG CHILD UP TO THE AGE OF SEVEN

The child in the first seven year phase expresses himself/herself through an abundance of energy and activity. Learning takes place through doing. Bodily development is the focus, and the greatest task of the parents and educators is to assure that the body is nourished in a healthy way. We must bring the kind of learning experiences that will develop this physical foundation of the human being into a skillful and able instrument so that the body will not prove a limitation and a hindrance to the individual's further unfolding. In Waldorf education we take care that the energy, vitality and inherent intelligence of the child have time to focus on this building up of a healthy body

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and are not siphoned off too early from this essential task into intellectual learning. Therefore in the Waldorf kindergarten no academic instruction takes place. Learning focuses on developing the will connected with the bodily intelligence. This is fostered through practical and artistic activities. Imaginative, creative play has a major role in the Waldorf kindergarten, as this activity of imaging is the foundation for all later, higher level academic learning and thought activity.

Entering a Waldorf kindergarten one would first notice the warm and joyful atmosphere, the rich colors and the large play area. In addition one would see many baskets with different natural materials and objects for play, perhaps baskets with wood pieces of all sizes and shapes to be used for building. Baskets with shells, chestnuts, wool, and colored cloth are there to stimulate the child's imagination for play but also to give a multi-sensory experience. There would be play houses with furniture, dolls, dishes etc., and wooden stands used as walls or dividers for castles or stables, stores or houses, or anything else the children might want to create. Everything invites them to enter into imaginative symbolic play. In play the child makes friends with the world and begins to understand it. Play is an activity into which children enter with their whole being. Therefore, play is self-healing, it is therapy because the child is not only in touch with the world but at the same time with his/her own creative potential, with her own Self.

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Part of the morning in the Waldorf kindergarten is dedicated to a strong artistic experience of the oral language. The children hear nature and seasonal stories which connect them with their immediate natural environment, the seasons of the year and with various festivals. Fairy tales from different cultures stimulate their imaging activity and feed their play activity. Through songs, verses, poems, finger games etc. the children connect with the sounds and rhythms of their language.

The more practical activities center around the kitchen where every day a meal is prepared. Children help with cleaning and cutting of vegetables or fruit, and with the kneading and baking of bread. Snacks are prepared, tables cleaned and set, and floors swept. Through these indoor activities and other outdoor activities (with carefully chosen play yard equipment), the child's motor sensory development is strongly addressed and developed. Motor sensory, creative imaging and language development are key aspects of the Waldorf kindergarten experience.

THE PATH FROM CHILD TO TEEN

At the beginning of the second seven-year phase Rudolf Steiner points to a time of great inner change where the emphasis of the child shifts from bodily will-oriented activity to a more soul and heart-oriented perception and understanding of the

natural and human environment. Rudolf Steiner was, to my knowledge, the only educator who made the phenomenal discovery that the forces of energy, vitality and health, that have been active in body building and organ forming until approximately the age of 7, are partially freed from their activity in the body. These forces now become available for the sphere of thought and mental activity. As these forces built up and formed the physical organism before so do they now build up and form the childs thought life. As a consequence the child is no longer dependent on outer objects for creative, symbolic activity but can develop an independent internal imaging ability. With this shift in force fields from outer (body) to inner (soul) the child also gains greater control over memory and can recall at will. Rudolf Steiner pointed to the change of teeth as the outer sign that this significant inner shift was occurring. This shift which avails the child of greater ability in and control over conceptual activity is considered a prerequisite for successful academic learning in grade one.

Now that the child is ready for academic learning, the path from speaking to writing to reading - in that order - can being. Why is reading not emphasized more in grade one? It is the most abstract and intellectual of these three activities and makes higher demands on inner picturing and conceptualization. This ability is just developing. Therefore the child is led gradually from a very strong and joyful oral language experience to the written sounds and words and finally to reading.

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In grades 1 to 3 we begin each Main Lesson (the first two hours of the day) with an extended time of rhythmic activity. The children walk, clap, stamp, skip, move to poems, verses, rhymes and songs which all recite and sing. Through this activity they attain an intimate experience of the rhythm, rhyme, melody and sound of their language. In this way a love and appreciation for their mother tongue can be awakened. The goal is that all children are involved actively and joyfully. Each poem or verse is spoken with different intonation, each has a different mood and a different expression. At one moment the children are foxes stealing through the brush, the next moment they are galloping horses, then tall trees in the forest, or fishes gliding through the water. These activities supply the children with a very rich oral language experience.

This rich experience is further enhanced through the story material that is presented to the children in the first few grades. The teacher does not read but tells the stories. This makes the presentation more alive and also nourishes the soul of the child more strongly while increasing the childs engagement, imaging activity and listening ability. Through the story material the students get to know morally responsible or irresponsible behavior which gives them a healthy moral foundation for social interation. In the process of retelling the stories, they learn to order their thoughts and express them in language; they experience the story line while also expanding

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their vocabularly. Out of this oral experience writing and reading is developed. The children read what they themselves have written in their own Main Lesson books. Great care is taken that reading becomes a meaningful, enjoyable activity and not a mechanical exercise. Children should never just "bark at print." (3)

Through the story material, which leads the child from Folk and Fairy Tales to Mythology and then to History (from grade 5 onwards), the particular intelligence of this second seven year period is strongly addressed. Rudolf Steiner points to the intelligence of the child becoming more and more saturated with feeling. A heart intelligence is awakening, not yet the adult, abstract, intellectual, scientific intelligence. Steiner points to two important shifts in consciousness within this second seven-year period, one shift occurs around the age of nine when subject-object consciousness becomes an inner experience of separation. This often manifests in a feeling of loneliness and disillusionment (a first and more gentle pre-shadowing of puberty). At this time the stories of the Old Testament (told in grade 3) and various mythologies (told in grades 4 and 5) present to the children the time in history when humanity as a whole experienced the loss of its intimate connectedness with the divine and the natural world. This inner experience of loneliness and separation and the resulting feeling of insecurity is further addressed by the Waldorf curriculum through several

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blocks of "practical activities." The students spend blocks of time with house-building, farming, clothing and cooking. In each area the children experience the process involved from beginning to end. In second grade they plant wheat and later harvest it. In the third grade they flail the wheat (by hand) then in the cooking block grind the kernels to flour and bake bread which they share together. They follow the process from beginning to end, which gives them a clearly demonstrated confidence while it develops love for nature and responsibility toward it.

Through the separation experienced between the subjective and objective world, abstract cause and effect thinking begins to awaken in the students between the age of 11 and 12 and marks the second shift in their conceptual abilities. This cause and effect thinking, which is experienced as a new independence in thinking, stimulates in the youngster a greater interest in the physical sciences. These sciences therefore, enter the curriculum from grade 6 onward to meet the new conceptual ability and the enhanced interest.

We see then in this second seven year period, from 7-14, a shift from the awakening of the heart intelligence with the inner imaging ability to the onset of abstract cause and effect thinking around age 12. This kind of conceptual ability increases to a full- fledged capacity at the end of the junior high school and beyond.

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The Waldorf curriculum integrates the arts into all the various subjects taught, whether they be the language arts, math or sciences. The arts together with the story/history material stimulate the creativity and imagination of the students and these in turn energize their motivation to learn. The arts complement the sciences. By being encouraged to draw the phenomena of the natural world, the youngsters are taught to observe more consciously and carefully. This in turn will further stimulate their interest in the world around them. "The arts teach divergent rather than convergent thinking. They ask students to come up with different rather than similar solutions." (4) They teach youngsters that there are many correct answers and interpretations. Arts individualize while at the same time sensitizing the young person to the achievements of other human beings and cultures. One thing that is often forgotten is that the arts teach control and discipline, for each art has its own set of tools and rules that have to be followed in order to have a satisfying and successful experience.

Underlying all Waldorf teaching from ages 7-14 is the realization that a healthy moral foundation has to be established at this time when the heart responds to all learning. Therefore, the underlying goal is to awaken wonder and develop appreciation, respect, and moral responsibility with each subject presented to the children. This approach is a key component in order to develop a balanced and socially healthy response towards their

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natural and human environment. This is an aspect of education that should not be missed in our time. By the time the youngster turns 12, when abstract conceptualization begins, a deep love and reverence for natural and human diversity should have been fostered. This will bring the necessary respect and empathy into thinking and prevent a mere self-serving, manipulative, consumer attitude toward the environment. This fostering of moral responsibility is the main thrust in developing an ecological consciousness. The integrated arts and crafts, the story/history/geography material, (history is taught through a biographical approach), the gardening program, play a major role in the development of a world-wide social consciousness.

In order to balance the emotionally challenging time of puberty, independent thinking is strongly fostered through all subjects taught in the high school. Even though beginnings of independent thought can be noticed around the age of 12, the capacity to think things through independently does not come to blossom until the 8th grade. Even then not all children are ready to take this new step in their development. Most issues are still decided emotionally rather than with clear pros and cons.

The challenge for the Waldorf teacher in the high school years is to develop in the students the ability to come to informed and clear judgments in their decision making processes and not to remain in their emotionalism which would lead them to judgmental,

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uninformed decisions. How this ability is prepared in the lower school can be seen in this article. How it is handled in the Waldorf high school will have to be the content of another article.

We can then see how in the beginning of life, from birth to 6/7 years of age, children learn by imitating the activities in their environment. The child wants to act and do and in that process develop his bodily-will intelligence. From approximately 7 - 13/14 in the second 7-year period, the heart and feeling need to be addressed very strongly in all learning. In the time of 13/14 till the end of high school, independent thinking has to be emphasized and developed, though none of the previous learning modes are dropped. For, we must realize that the healthy development of one seven year period depends on the healthy development of the previous period. In this way we can hope for a well balanced adult who can act in the world in a thoughtful and socially responsible way.

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